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RESPONDING TO HUGO CHAVEZ

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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3 May 2010

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Abstract

Responding to Hugo Chavez

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's strong anti-U.S. sentiment and continued claims of U.S. imperialism have blocked U.S. progress in that area of the world. Capitalizing on wealth garnered from oil exportation Chavez affects regional security and stability by his support of the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), increased economic relations with China, sustained military relations with Russia, and an ever strengthening relationship with Iran. Following the Department of State model of not dealing with Chavez directly, the paper focuses on ways U.S. Southern Command can accomplish those regional goals, as outlined in their current Theater Campaign Plan (TCP), which Chavez continues to hinder. The paper concludes that strengthening U.S. partnerships in the South American region through peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, traditional maritime exercises, and counter-drug support operations as well as continued U.S. involvement in programs like "Plan Colombia" will show the U.S. as a committed and long term regional ally. These actions will not only disprove Chavez's anti-U.S. message but marginalize his regional influence.

Introduction

Emboldened by Venezuela's large oil-resources and close relationships with Russia, China, and Iran President Hugo Chavez continues to claim that the U.S. is an imperial power intent on asserting its dominance over the region. If Chavez galvanizes other Latin American countries to position themselves against the U.S., accomplishing regional goals would be made more difficult. With no desire to relinquish any power and in spite of political opposition trying to remove him from office on several occasions, Chavez has continued to manipulate the Venezuelan government and economy to suit his agenda. This agenda has taken the form of his "Bolivarian Revolution" which seeks to build Venezuelan economic independence, improve Venezuelan quality of life, distribute the country's wealth equitably, and attempts to end political corruption. While his agenda has failed in achieving its goals, Chavez continues to pursue it through petro-politics and relationships with countries and organizations that threaten U.S. goals of regional security and stability. Additionally, Venezuela's military build-up, discussed later in this paper, threatens overall stability as border tensions increase and alliances cause regional division.

This paper looks at U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) and its continuing numerous initiatives, programs, and exercises designed to strengthen U.S./Latin American relations in lieu of Chavez's continued attempts to disrupt U.S. goals. As a thesis, this paper asserts that SOUTHCOM's sponsorship and participation in these exercises and operations will reinforce U.S. strategic communication by maximizing regional security in promoting persistent engagement, partnership building, and understanding. These actions will negate

Chavez's claims of the U.S. as an imperial power intent on asserting its dominance over Latin America for its own selfish reasons.

Chavez and his Rise to Power

Fueled by his hatred of Venezuela's "rancid oligarchy" and the fact that it was supported by multiple U.S. administrations for decades, Chavez does not see the difference between the U.S. and those corrupt elites who previously ran Venezuela.¹ From the outset of his coming to power in 1999, Chavez's anti-U.S. position against a country that he claims abuses its poor and has imperialistic desires has defined his presidency. The relationship between Chavez and the Bush administration further deteriorated following an April 2002 failed military *coup d'etat* against the Chavez regime in which Chavez has maintained, but to this date has failed to produce any proof, had direct U.S. involvement in its planning.² The fact that the Bush administration made initial statements supporting the new government made matters worse upon Chavez's return to power a few months after the failed coup.³

From 2002 to 2006, strong words between U.S. and Venezuelan officials continued to be exchanged in the public arena as accusations were slung back and forth. Tensions peaked on September 20, 2006 when Chavez addressed the United Nations General Assembly and proceeded to verbally attack President George W. Bush. Calling Bush the "Devil" and claiming that the "hegemonic pretension of U.S. imperialism puts the very survival of the human species at risk," Chavez's assertions that day fell far outside the boundaries of

¹ Michael Shifter, "Hugo Chavez: A Test for U.S. Policy," *Inter-American Dialogue*, March 2007, 18.

² Shifter, p. 18.

³ Shifter, p. 18.

political decorum and may have weakened his legitimacy.⁴ As a result, the Bush administration adopted a new strategy of ignoring Chavez and his anti-U.S./Bush rhetoric. During a Bush visit to Brazil and Uruguay in March of 2007 Chavez led an anti-U.S. rally in Argentina. U.S. leadership responded by emphasizing that they wanted to focus on a positive agenda for U.S. / Latin America engagement without mentioning Chavez once.⁵

U.S. commitment to this approach was tested on March 1, 2008 when a Colombian raid on a Colombia Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) camp in Ecuador resulted in the capture of laptop computers. Colombian officials maintained that the laptops contained files linking the Venezuelan government with efforts to securing weapons for the FARC.⁶ Denying these accusations, Chavez then called for the FARC to disarm and for U.S./Venezuelan cooperation. In Congressional testimony given on July 17, 2008 Tom Shannon, the Assistant Secretary of State from Western Hemisphere Affairs, maintained the high road when he stated that “we remain committed to a positive relationship with the people of Venezuela and have the patience and persistence necessary to manage our challenging relationship.”⁷ Shannon further asserted that for the first time in years, Venezuela had expressed wanting to improve relations with the U.S. This included counter-drug cooperation between the two countries to which the State Department had let Venezuelan officials know that the U.S. would like to begin a diplomatic relationship.⁸

Chavez’s kicking U.S. Ambassador Patrick Duddy out of Venezuela, in September of 2008, based off of his claims that the Venezuelan government had discovered and foiled a

⁴ Mark P. Sullivan, Venezuela: Political Conditions and U.S. Policy (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 28 July 2009), 34.

⁵ Sullivan, p. 35.

⁶ Sullivan, p. 36.

⁷ Sullivan, p. 30.

⁸ Sullivan, p. 31.

U.S. backed conspiracy to assassinate him provide a glimpse as to his true intentions during the summer of 2008. By ejecting Duddy from Venezuela, Chavez guaranteed that the Venezuelan ambassador would be expelled from the U.S. This break in relations, stemming from false claims by Chavez, absolved him from having to cooperate with the U.S. Chavez could then maintain, in the world arena, that had the U.S. not involved itself in an assassination plot against him, counter-drug cooperation would have occurred. It is no surprise that by the end of 2008 Venezuela had failed in adhering to international narcotics control agreements for a fourth year in a row.⁹ Shortly after that, Chavez came under further scrutiny when the Swedish government asked him for an explanation of how three Swedish anti-tank rocket launchers, sold to Venezuela in the 1980s, had made it into the hands of the FARC after they were found in an arms cache in October of 2008.¹⁰

With newly elected President Barrack Obama in office, Chavez has assumed a more cordial posture when dealing with U.S. political leadership. During the 2009 Summit of the Americas in Trinidad, Chavez presented Obama with a book entitled “Las Venas Abiertas de America Latina” or “The Open Veins of Latin America” by Eduardo Galeano. The book describes the centuries of invasions and attempts to influence Latin American affairs by outside powers to include the U.S.¹¹ While this was an obvious publicity ploy, improved relations between Chavez and the White House have resulted in the return of Duddy to Venezuela and the return of the Venezuelan Ambassador to Washington D.C.

⁹ Sullivan, p. 37.

¹⁰ Sullivan, p. 46.

¹¹ Stephen Dinan, “From Chavez, literary criticism; Gives book assailing U.S., but vows better relations,” *The Washington Times*, 19 April 2009, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/> (accessed 17 March 2010).

State Department's Perspective

According to the FY 2010 U.S. Department of State Mission Strategic Plan (MSP) for Venezuela, there are multiple foreign policy priorities that the U.S. has interests in developing and maintaining. The first State Department priority is that Venezuelan democratic institutions must be preserved and strengthened despite Chavez's "Bolivarian Revolution."¹² While Chavez has been consolidating power, Venezuela has continued to be a commercial partner with the U.S. While the country's petroleum sector enjoys substantial U.S. investment, the Venezuelan market for U.S. products continues to grow.¹³ This positive economic tie must continue to be protected in spite of increasingly hostile policies and, according to the State Department, constitutes another priority.

Refusing to work with U.S. law enforcement agencies, the Chavez regime supports transnational criminal activities by enabling these criminals to ship illegal drugs and launder money within Venezuela's borders.¹⁴ Additionally, Chavez has continued to strengthen his relationship with the FARC. These actions speak to his direct opposition to U.S. government policies and values when it comes to regional political, counter-narcotics, and counter-terrorism goals.

According to the MSP, the Department of State has attempted on several occasions to open up a bilateral dialogue with Chavez concerning economic, oil, judicial cooperation, and law enforcement issues.¹⁵ These attempts have only been met with the usual Chavez

¹² U.S. Department of State, FY 2010 Mission Strategic Plan, U.S. Mission to Venezuela, 2.

¹³ U.S. Mission to Venezuela MSP, p. 2.

¹⁴ U.S. Mission to Venezuela MSP, p. 2.

¹⁵ U.S. Mission to Venezuela MSP, p. 2.

“showmanship” while the personnel, in the working levels of the Venezuelan government, have been restricted from any attempt to work with their U.S. counterparts.¹⁶

Chavez does not appear to have a desire to build any kind of positive relationship with the U.S. While this is a sobering reality, the Chief of Mission of the U.S. Embassy in Venezuela has named his primary goal to be the preservation and strengthening of local remaining non-governmental agencies, democratic political parties, and human rights groups in the country.¹⁷ Other U.S. goals include promoting a mutual understanding of U.S. policies and objectives, promoting and protecting U.S. economic interests, disrupting criminal organizations, and preventing and responding to terrorism.¹⁸

SOUTHCOM's Perspective

When the U.S. Navy's 4th Fleet was re-established in April of 2008, the primary focus it was assigned was that of strengthening U.S. friendships and partnerships in the South American region. The fleet was assigned five missions encompassing peacekeeping action, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, traditional maritime exercises, and counter-drug support operations.¹⁹ Although the creation of 4th Fleet is primarily organizational in nature and Rear Admiral Joseph Kernan, Commander of the 4th Fleet, has limited assets Chavez, President of Bolivia Evo Morales, and Cuba's Fidel Castro claim that its re-establishment creates a direct threat to the sovereignty of Latin American countries.²⁰

¹⁶ U.S. Mission to Venezuela MSP, p. 2.

¹⁷ U.S. Mission to Venezuela MSP, p. 8.

¹⁸ U.S. Mission to Venezuela MSP, pps. 9-14.

¹⁹ Dan Taylor, “Kernan; 4th Fleet Will Help Bring More Resources to South America,” *Inside the Navy*, 11 August 2008, http://www.insidedefense.com/secure/display.asp?docnum=NAVY-21-32-2&f=defense_2002.ask (accessed 17 March 2010).

²⁰ Taylor, (accessed 17 March 2010).

In an August 2008 interview with *Inside the Navy*, Kernan stated that the Venezuelan president complicates things for the Navy “only because he says those things in the press there that are inaccurate and when he does that and people see that and believe it, that we have some nefarious or insidious intentions down there as a fleet or as a nation, people will hear that and there’s a certain number of people that will come to believe it. So that is counter, certainly, to what we’re doing.”²¹ Kernan further went on to say that Chavez is trying to disrupt partnerships between the U.S. and Latin American nations by fostering a sense of distrust.²² SOUTHCOM’s continued successful involvement in the annual Continuing Promise mission which provides U.S. humanitarian and civic assistance to the region, to the Southern Partnership Station mission which facilitates military-to-military multi-lateral training, to the long-running UNITAS exercises which bring together ten South American militaries with the goal of promoting maritime security and stability all endorse regional interests in a way that are mutually beneficial to both the U.S. and Latin American countries.

Displaying sensitivity for history further reinforces the type of relationship SOUTHCOM is looking to have with Latin American countries. This was seen in July of 2009 when sailors from the USS Doyle rendered honors to a past Chilean naval hero as the ship pulled into Iquique, Chile during the 2009 Teamwork South exercise. Actions by the USS Doyle crew represent an example of respecting another country’s military heritage and will help show that the U.S. is no a despotic hegemony.

Despite Chavez’s political assertion about the threats the U.S. military poses, the SOUTHCOM theme of security and lasting partnership between the U.S. and Latin American

²¹ Taylor, (accessed 17 March 2010).

²² Taylor, (accessed 17 March 2010).

states countries has remained the same for a number of years. On September 21, 2006 then commander of SOUTHCOM, U.S. Army General Bantz Craddock stated to reporters that SOUTHCOM wanted Venezuelan participation in exercises and training.²³ In that same interview Craddock went on to say that “We have some Venezuelan officers in the United States training. We value that. We would hope they would continue to come.”²⁴ Today, despite a negligible turnout, SOUTHCOM officials continue to invite Venezuelan military leaders to all regional military conferences and meetings and Venezuelan military officers are welcome to participate in U.S. training venues.²⁵

The Chavez Challenge

In keeping with its Theater Security Cooperation Plan (TSCP), SOUTHCOM’s mission statement for their March 20, 2009 Theater Campaign Plan (TCP) says it is to, “Conduct military operations and promote security cooperation to achieve U.S. strategic objectives with an interagency focus.”²⁶ According to the TCP there are six theater strategic end states or goals that SOUTHCOM is required to pursue in the Latin American and Caribbean region.²⁷ While there are challenges in completing all of them, the TCP points to Chavez as a partial reason why two of them cannot be presently accomplished.²⁸

Continuing to disrupt one of the theater strategic goals which focuses on all states in the region countering transnational threats, the Chavez regime continues to do the exact opposite. Venezuela recently spent \$3 billion on contracts to buy 24 Russian Su-30 fighter

²³ Kathleen T. Rhem, “U.S. Commander Concerned Over Venezuela’s Exporting of Instability,” 21 September 2006, <http://www.southcom.mil/AppsSC/news.php?storyId=47> (accessed 17 March 2010).

²⁴ Rhem, (accessed 17 March 2010).

²⁵ Rhem, (accessed 17 March 2010).

²⁶ U.S. Southern Command, 20 March 2009 Theater Campaign Plan, 1.

²⁷ USSOUTHCOM TCP, Appendix 1 to Annex A.

²⁸ USSOUTHCOM TCP, pps. A-1-4 and A-1-9.

jets and 53 Russian helicopters.²⁹ Later, over U.S. protests, the Russian government sold and shipped 100,000 AK-103 rifles to Venezuela and has a plan to build a Kalashnikov factory there. Although Chavez maintains that these arms purchases are for the defense of his country against a U.S. invasion and to fight the drug war, there is concern that these many cheap and unaccounted for weapons may contribute to a rise in violent crime ending up in the hands of the FARC or Colombian drug traffickers.³⁰ Additionally, during a recent visit to Russia there was discussion about Chavez purchasing Russian diesel submarines, missile launchers, patrol crafts, hovercraft, coastal defense missile launchers, transport aircraft, and tanker aircraft.³¹ While it is currently unknown what military equipment Chavez will purchase from the Russians, what is known is that he plans to spend up to \$30 billion re-equipping the Venezuelan armed forces from 2009 to 2011.³² Chavez's relationship with the Russians continues to strengthen as he looks for help in developing nuclear energy. Lastly, recent Venezuelan-Russian naval exercises in the Caribbean are cause for SOUTHCOM concern considering how close Venezuela is to the U.S. geographically.³³

Besides establishing military-to-military and military procurement relationships with Russia, Chavez seeks to establish and strengthen military procurement relations with China. This newly established relationship could also turn into a transnational threat. In 2008, Venezuela signed an agreement for the acquisition of 24 fighter trainers from China for \$120 million.³⁴

²⁹ Shifter, p. 16.

³⁰ Shifter, p. 16.

³¹ Viktor Barantsev, "Venezuela now buying more Russian arms than China or India," *BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, 30 September 2009, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/> (accessed 17 March 2010).

³² Barantsev, (accessed 17 March 2010).

³³ USSOUTHCOM TCP, p. 18.

³⁴ Inigo Guevara, "Venezuela signs fighter deal with China," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 8 October 2008, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/> (accessed 17 March 2010).

Lastly, the strengthening relationship between Chavez and Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad since 2006 is a cause for concern. With a plan to support Iran with 20,000 barrels of gasoline a day, in an effort to compensate for its minimal oil refining capacities hamstrung by sanctions, Venezuela may allow Iran to mine for recently found Uranium deposits.³⁵ Chavez has made no secret about his plans to build a "nuclear village" in Venezuela with Iran's help.³⁶ The two countries have also signed a military support pledge.³⁷ Particularly alarming is the fact that Iranian advisors are training Venezuelan forces in the same type of asymmetrical warfare that is employed by terrorist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah.³⁸

The other SOUTHCOM goal that Chavez seeks to disrupt is the U.S. ability to maintain freedom of movement for commerce and the military.³⁹ According to the TCP while the U.S. military enjoys the freedom of movement throughout the Latin American region, Venezuelan rhetoric in the international media coupled with petrol diplomacy is promoting anti-U.S. sentiment.⁴⁰ Shortly after the April 2009 G20 Economic Summit Chavez told Chinese president and Communist Party leader Hu Jintao that he wanted to not only help build three crude oil refineries in China but also triple Venezuelan oil exports to that country to the extent that it would substantially reduce oil sales to the U.S.⁴¹

Petro-politics is a technique that Chavez has used before. In July 2005, Chavez openly rejected U.S. plans to extend free trade amongst Latin American countries charging

³⁵ Editorial, "Clear and Present Danger," *Daily News* (New York), 9 September 2009, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/> (accessed 17 March 2010).

³⁶ Simon Romero, "Venezuela Says Iran Is Helping It Look for Uranium," *The New York Times*, 26 September 2009, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/> (accessed 24 February 2010).

³⁷ Editorial, "Clear and Present Danger," (accessed 17 March 2010).

³⁸ Editorial, "Clear and Present Danger," (accessed 17 March 2010).

³⁹ USSOUTHCOM TCP, p. A-1-9.

⁴⁰ USSOUTHCOM TCP, p. A-1-9.

⁴¹ John Garnaut, "Adios US: now China leads the world, says Chavez," *Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia), 10 April 2009, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/> (accessed 17 March 2010).

the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) as imperialistic in nature and a means by which the U.S. could assert political and economic control.⁴² As a result, during November 2005 at the Summit of the Americas, Chavez and the leaders of Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay buried the FTAA by refusing to specify a deadline for talks.⁴³

In place of the FTAA proposal, Chavez presented the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) which called on complementary trade and cooperation vice free-market competition.⁴⁴ Fortunately for the U.S., Chavez's ALBA is not very effective and is more of a propaganda tool. In May 2006, Chavez's influence was seen again as Evo Morales presented the Trade Treaty of the Peoples which stressed solidarity among Latin American countries in the face of the U.S. influence on hemispheric trade.⁴⁵

Colombia's Role

In lieu of Chavez's continual denial that the Venezuelan government is not linked to the FARC, Chavez has led the charge against Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe for recently signing an agreement which allows U.S. forces to use seven military bases positioned throughout Colombia. Denouncing the agreement between the U.S. and Colombia Chavez, along with Ecuadorian and Nicaraguan leadership, has charged Uribe with "giving itself (Colombia) away shamelessly to the United States."⁴⁶ Amid Chavez's plans to purchase short-range missiles in defense of Venezuela's borders, threats of cutting off trade with Colombia, and talk of preparing to go to war over the leasing agreement Chavez has claimed

⁴² Shifter, p. 22.

⁴³ Richard Lapper, *Living with Hugo: U.S. Policy Toward Hugo Chavez's Venezuela* (New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations, November 2006), 29.

⁴⁴ Shifter, p. 23.

⁴⁵ Lapper, p. 29.

⁴⁶ Rodolfo Rivera, "Venezuelan deputy says Colombia – USA pact a "threat" to regional peace," *BBC Worldwide Monitoring*, 1 January 2010, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/> (accessed 24 February 2010).

that the Venezuelan Government is a victim of an international slander campaign and that Venezuelan sovereignty has been directly threatened.⁴⁷ Although Chavez has, on several occasions, called for the FARC to lay down its arms and declared that a negotiated settlement is the only way to end the Colombian conflict, there are too many recent incidents where monies and arms found in the possession of the FARC have been traced back to the Venezuelan government.⁴⁸

Colombia opened its doors to the U.S. military after a decade long agreement between the U.S. and Ecuador, allowing E-3 AWACs and P-3 Orion surveillance planes to operate from Ecuador's Pacific Coast in the fight against illegal drug trafficking, ended. Despite Chavez's claim, under this new agreement, U.S. military personnel cannot exceed 800 in number and cannot take part in combat operations.⁴⁹ The stipulations of the base leasing agreement are a far cry from the invasion of Latin America by the "Yankee" military as Chavez continues to assert.

While this move by the U.S. is aimed at aiding the Colombian government in its fight against the FARC, it is also a way for the U.S. through SOUTHCOM to assist in one aspect of achieving regional security. Colombia has become a strong ally when it comes to countering Chavez's U.S. imperialistic claims and regional influence in lieu of the infamous FARC laptops and recent Russian presence in Venezuelan waters.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Rivera, (accessed 24 February 2010).

⁴⁸ Gregory Wilpert, "U.S. Troops in Colombia: A Threat to Peace," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 42, iss. 5 (September/October 2009): 3.

⁴⁹ Simon Romero, "Leftist leaders in South America bemoan closer U.S. – Colombia ties," *The International Herald Tribune*, 23 July 2009, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/> (accessed 24 February 2010).

⁵⁰ Romero, "Leftist leaders in South America bemoan closer U.S. – Colombia ties," (accessed 24 February 2010).

In 2000 the U.S. Congress approved “Plan Colombia” which was a \$1.3 billion aid package of mostly military assistance to eradicate coca crops in southern Colombia.⁵¹ At that time, Colombian military and police forces were so unorganized and ill-equipped to deal with the drug threat that isolated bases were being overrun and both soldiers and policemen captured by the dozens.⁵² “Plan Colombia” was originally intended to only focus on stopping the flow of cocaine before it reached U.S. streets. While it started off backwards with a “drugs only” focus, it soon morphed into professionalizing the Colombian military and police forces through training engagements with U.S. military forces. Coupled with Colombia’s orchestration of numerous internal military reforms, in the form of restructuring and modernization, and massive continual U.S. financial aid the Colombian military has turned around and is Latin America’s most skilled fighting force.⁵³

The successful execution of “Plan Colombia” resulted in the Colombian government being able to drive guerrilla forces like the FARC out of the cities and deep into the jungle. 21,000 combatants have laid down their arms since 2002, street crime is down, and kidnappings have fallen 90% in the last seven years.⁵⁴

In the wake of the FARC suffering losses of its leadership and through mass defections, Chavez found himself withdrawing his public support of them. On June 8, 2008 he told the organization to end its 44-year rebellion and release more than 700 kidnap victims.⁵⁵ “Plan Colombia” is a success story on two fronts. The first is that it has and

⁵¹ David Adams, “Colombia’s Quiet Military Revolution,” *St. Petersburg Times* (Florida), 13 July 2008, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/> (accessed 12 April 2010).

⁵² Adams, (accessed 12 April 2010).

⁵³ Adams, (accessed 12 April 2010).

⁵⁴ Mac Margolis, “Uribe’s Legacy,” *Newsweek*, 21 December 2009, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/> (accessed 12 April 2010).

⁵⁵ Editorial, “Terror in retreat,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 13 June 2008, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/> (accessed 12 April 2010).

continued to severely cripple organizations such as the FARC which attempt to disrupt regional security and stability. The second is that U.S. actions are seen within the region as not being imperialistic in nature as Chavez continues to claim. In the end, U.S. actions in assisting the Colombian government reinforced cooperation through a partnership designed to ensure regional security and stability.

Counter-Argument: SOUTHCOM can't wait

One could take the position that Chavez is so large a threat that SOUTHCOM needs to deal with immediately and directly. Following the recent U.S. policy of ignoring or mildly chastising his anti-U.S. rhetoric and actions is no longer a viable option. An enduring relationship with the FARC facilitating their criminal activities, increased economic relations with China, and sustained military relations with Russia are all cause for concern when it comes to the security and stability of the Latin American region. While these are all credible concerns, perhaps the biggest direct threat to the U.S. is the Venezuelan/Iranian relationship that has strengthened over the past few years. The nuclear energy capability both Venezuela and Iran seek, which could lead to their eventual development of nuclear weapons, as well as both countries links to terrorism are two reasons why the U.S. can no longer wait for the Chavez regime to just run its course.

Refutation: Chavez will eventually fail

While the Chavez regime is a threat, Venezuela is not at the point where it can severely cripple the U.S. militarily and economically. At this time, direct U.S. military action against Chavez is not warranted and would counter partnerships and trust that have

taken so long for the U.S. to establish with regional leadership. If the U.S. waits long enough, the Chavez regime may implode. From an internal perspective Chavez's grip on power will eventually slip to the point where he can no longer recover it. Such was the setting in March of 2002 when Chavez's approval ratings were in the low 30%, the Venezuelan currency was harshly devalued, and the country's gross domestic product (GDP) had declined 4.4%.⁵⁶ In response to this situation, Chavez opposition attempted to remove him out of office but did so badly. Using unconstitutional methods and responsible for deepening the effects of the recession by pursuing a two month national strike, Chavez's opponents made the situation in Venezuela even worse. With the failure of the strike, which cost the country upwards of ten percent of its GDP, Chavez's political opponents set the stage for his return to greatness in the eyes of the Venezuelan people. Given the opposition's illegal actions, Chavez was able to shift the country's economic problems on to them which bought him time to formulate and orchestrate a new political strategy which kept him in power.⁵⁷

In early 2008, Chavez found himself in the same predicament he had been in six years earlier. Opinion surveys showed the government's popularity was very low and most Venezuelans blamed Chavez for most of the country's problems despite a ten-fold increase in exported oil prices.⁵⁸ Going back to his 2002 playbook, Chavez shifted the negative focus from him to the fact that Venezuelan sovereignty was in danger. The March 2008 announcement by Chavez that ten Venezuelan army battalions were being mobilized to be sent to the Colombian border was a reaction to an incident that had occurred more than 500

⁵⁶ Francisco Rodriguez, "Venezuela's Revolution in Decline: Beware the Wounded Tiger," *World Policy Journal*, Spring 2008, 46.

⁵⁷ Rodriguez, p. 47.

⁵⁸ Rodriguez, p. 55.

miles away from Venezuela borders.⁵⁹ In reality this incident had nothing to do with Venezuela but instead involved Colombian military forces going into Ecuadorian territory in pursuit of FARC members. This over-reaction is typical of Chavez who, when facing a loss of popularity, attempts to shift the Venezuelan populace's focus to external or internal threats; real or fabricated. At some point, Chavez's political opponents and the effects of bad governance will put him in a position where the Venezuelan people will have to hold him accountable.

Externally, Chavez has also been losing support in the region. The first example occurred last year when Ecuador's vice president stated that his country would not allow Chavez to drag it into a war with Colombia.⁶⁰ Ecuador's defense minister reiterated that the FARC was not a legitimate Colombian state actor and that Ecuador had "zero tolerance" for their criminal activities.⁶¹ As a result, relations have improved between Ecuador and Colombia as Ecuadorian military forces have begun cracking down on the FARC along its border. The second example of a regional loss of support was seen in the fact that although Venezuela signed a membership agreement in June 2006 to become a part of Mercosur, a regional trade agreement between Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay, last year it was not ratified by the Paraguayan Congress to become a full member.⁶² This rejection followed Brazil's vote against Venezuelan membership in 2008. Lastly Chavez's ally in Argentina, President Cristina Fernandez, recently lost that country's congressional elections and is now

⁵⁹ Rodriguez, p. 45.

⁶⁰ Edward Schumacher-Matos, "An Open Hand That Weakens Chavez," *The Washington Post*, 21 August 2009, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/> (accessed 12 April 2010).

⁶¹ Schumacher-Matos, (accessed 12 April 2010).

⁶² Schumacher-Matos, (accessed 12 April 2010).

in the minority.⁶³ As a result in this shift of alliances, the Chavez regime finds its only regional support coming from two small countries; Bolivia and Nicaragua.

Recommended Actions for SOUTHCOM

While the State Department attempts to preserve and strengthen local remaining non-governmental agencies, democratic political parties, and human rights groups in Venezuela SOUTHCOM does not have the luxury of being able to re-establish relationships with Venezuelan military leadership as long as Chavez remains in power. Following the State Department model of not dealing with Venezuelan leadership directly, SOUTHCOM must continue to strive for achieving security and stability via continued partnerships strengthened through numerous regional military exercises. Additionally, U.S. involvement in “real world” issues from drug interdiction, to providing disaster relief, to sponsoring regional medical training missions will show that the U.S. is a strong and committed ally.

Conveying the message that the U.S. is not an imperialistic power will only occur through a continued policy of openness and sponsorship/participation in regional multi-lateral exercises and operations. Fostering trust between the U.S. military and Latin American leaders, as is being done with “Plan Colombia”, is the only way to disprove Chavez’s anti-U.S. message and limit his threat to regional security and stability.

Conclusion

While Hugo Chavez has been an outspoken critic of U.S. policies and initiatives in Latin America since his coming to power in Venezuela in 1999, he has actively opposed the

⁶³ Schumacher-Matos, (accessed 12 April 2010).

U.S. on several fronts while consolidating his power. His actions and words also affect regional security and stability as he has formed open relations with countries such as Russia, China, and most recently Iran. Massive military purchases from Russia and a rise in Venezuelan / Russian military relations have caused Venezuela's neighbors to have concern over Chavez's intentions. Chavez's attempts to substitute China for the U.S., when it comes to oil exportation, further show that he is intent on lessening his economic reliance on the U.S. Lastly, although Chavez has denied links to the FARC, his alleged support of it has caused significant regional consternation.

Capitalizing on building strong ties with other Latin American countries through regional exercises and U.S. participation in regional operations will not only keep Chavez in check but negate his anti-U.S. rhetoric. These initiatives coupled with Chavez's growing unpopularity, among the Venezuelan populace, and concerns brought forth by other Latin American countries due to his relationships with Russia, China, and Iran will hopefully lead to his political demise.

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